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AUTHOR	Nowalk, Thomas
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ABSTRACT

The focus of this practitioner brief is: How do adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students manage their learning? The adult ESL instructor found that his students wanted more opportunities to speak English in class, and to practice actual oral communication skills in English, but felt too much of their time and effort was directed into rote memorization, written translation, reciting, and checking dictionaries. To help make this happen, the instructor engaged in learner interviews, class observation, and looking over student notebooks. The data showed that the adult ESL learners managed learning as a coordination of their personal needs, cognitive strategies, and previous learning experiences. Their personal needs usually consisted of their comparisons of English to the structure of their native languages, or social needs arising from problems in conducting daily routines such as shopping. Cognitive strategies generally included recall and comprehension practice. What was missing from nearly all of these learning strategies were higher strategies such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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See How They Mean: How Adult ESL Students Manage Learning

Thomas Nowalk, Montgomery County Public Schools

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See How They Mean: How Adult ESL Students Manage Learning

Thomas Nowalk, Montgomery County Public Schools

Background

A disgruntled Brazilian student spoke with me after an ESL class about a tutoring session she had attended. A Literacy Volunteer of America (LVA) tutor had requested, as a way to practice new vocabulary words, that she write a short narrative about her family's arrival in the United States. She reported how difficult it was to remember the vocabulary for that lengthy writing exercise. As we drifted toward the end of our conversation, she gazed down at her notebook crowded with word lists, shook her head, and muttered "memorizing."

Like other ESL learners who had attended my classes, she felt her memory taxed. Other students have made similar complaints. Some linked the problem to age, with one student saying that his "brain was too old." Others felt that the issue was more a lack of practice.

I had found through previous practitioner research that students place a high priority on class participation. They want an opportunity to speak with the words and sentence patterns learned. Participation points to use. More importantly, class participation is a rehearsal for participation in our Southwest Virginia community.

Participation mattered to my students. Participation afforded chances to use English, which for many was not their language at home. They believed that use was critical for successful language learning. However, they pursued rote learning strategies in class: translating, reciting, and checking dictionaries. I wanted to understand more about the link between what seemed two disparate efforts toward learning. So, I set out on a new practitioner research project to examine the connection, focusing on adult learners directing their learning within the ESL classroom context.

Inquiry

How do my adult ESL students manage their learning?

Action

When beginning the project, I accepted some assumptions about my ESL students. As adult learners, they were applying general cognitive strategies toward their language learning. In an effort to describe these strategies, I adopted Bloom's taxonomy. Though Bloom established the taxonomy as a means of categorizing educational objectives, he presents it as a possible taxonomy for researchers as well. Moreover, the strategies were a conscious investment in the learning process; as adult learners my students could regulate and evaluate their learning.[1]

I further accepted some assumptions about my methodology. Ethnographic methods fit closely with my research topic. The rich descriptions generated by such methods as interviewing and observation are useful for determining learner perspectives on the topic. This recognizes the teacher as investigator, and as both spectator and participant in the contexts under scrutiny. More importantly, these methods contribute to a transformation of teaching practice.

Data Collection

This study relied on three data collection strategies: field notes, student interviews, and student notebooks. The field notes resulted from over six months of participant observation, with notes either written while class was in progress or within a few hours of the end of the lesson. I wrote the notes in double-entry format, with one column featuring raw observations and an adjacent column featuring reflective

comments about those observations. Student interviews lasted from 1 to 1-1/2 hours each, for a total of 10 interviews conducted over a four-week period. A professional transcriber produced transcripts of the interviews. Finally, I collected notebooks from seven students and photocopied 10 to 12 randomly selected pages from each. While these efforts served as my primary data collection strategies, I also kept a researcher log throughout the study to record my own actions and decisions in the progress of research.

Findings

The data showed that my adult ESL learners manage learning as a coordination of their personal needs, cognitive strategies, and previous learning experience. Field notes and interview transcripts indicated that these personal needs may be either a perceived linguistic contrast between English and the native language, as in Korean students' problems with prepositions, or social needs arising from problems in conducting daily routines such as shopping or helping children with homework. Cognitive strategies generally included recall and comprehension strategies, as observed in class. But during interviews, students highlighted attention to comprehension and practice. Notebooks reflected students' use of recall and comprehension strategies, with most notes being verbatim copies of class content or translations of class content. Listing was the most common form of note taking. As a Chinese student said, "Just copy." Interviews demonstrated how previous learning experience with either English or another foreign language affected their current study of English. Some interviewees reported dissatisfaction with learning English in high school through traditional or rote learning methods; others contrasted their current study with previous study of German.

Implications and Future Directions

The image of the Brazilian student at the opening of this report conjures up an effort at forging meaning. She worked at listing, recalling, and using her new vocabulary words for assigned writing exercise. The effort at managing her learning was like the effort of many other students — first translating and memorizing word lists, then making attempts to use the new words for communication. Like the students reported in this study, this Brazilian student managed learning through a two-step process of understanding then use, with memory tightly tied to the initial comprehension phase.

What interested me here, however, was the absence of higher strategies from Bloom's taxonomy: analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Few of these strategies were recorded; indeed, students' notebooks indicated very few attempts to generalize or reflect on linguistic information gleaned in class. I wonder here how my own teaching strategies may or may not influence this condition. As a teacher I need to provide practice not only for use of the language, but also practice for use of these reflective skills with linguistic patterns in class.

How students mean, whether through dictionary definitions or negotiated understanding through social interaction, or through textbook explanations, will be a future focus in my teaching. How students understand and represent their understanding points to preferences for kinds of practice that will have to be explored. As this study shows, there stands symmetry between meaning and practice. My own teaching practice can maintain or break that symmetry. Memory may be enhanced through such a relationship. ❑

[1] Bloom et al., (1956). Taxonomy of Educational Objectives Handbook 1: Cognitive Domain. New York: David McKay. Bloom's taxonomy includes six general strategies, divided into three lower and three higher cognitive strategies: recall, comprehension, practice, analysis, synthesis, evaluation. Bloom, et al. write, "... the psychological relationships employed by the classification scheme are suggestive of psychological investigations which could further our understanding of the educational process" (p. 3).

Practitioner Research Briefs, 1999-2000 Report Series

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